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SIPDIS

STATE FOR EUR/CACEN, SA, DRL

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: TAJIK MINISTRY OF EDUCATION BANS HIJABS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

1. Deputy Minister of Education Farkhod Rakhimov announced on October 19 that hijabs (Muslim head-coverings) are banned in schools and institutions of higher education. Education officials were instructed to disseminate this message throughout their schools. Students who violate this edict will face disciplinary consequences, even possible expulsion. Rakhimov, who heads the commission that promulgated this edict, reasons, "The hijab [represents] a form of religious ideology which contradicts the Law on Education and the Consitution."

2. Rakhimov told Embassy Political Assistant that the Government feels obliged to take preventive measures to curb students from wearing the hijab throughout Tajikistan in order to uphold secular education. He is convinced that students and their families are being coerced into wearing the hijab and offered cases in the Sughd region and Dushanbe as proof. In these cases, the students and their parents showed little evidence of being devoutly Muslim, but chose to wear a hijab. Therefore, the commission concluded, someone else encouraged them wear the hijab, perhaps to make a political statement.

3. Opposition figures and political and religious leaders have expressed disappointment and legal concerns about the law. Muhiddin Kabiri, First Deputy Chairman of the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), appealed directly to the Minister of Education. Post believes the majority of the country, up to this point, has been indifferent to the hijab's place in schools. Domullo Naim, a leading Islamic Scholar of the region, fears the law will incite a greater rift between the government and observant Muslims, laying the groundwork for religious extremism.

4. COMMENT: The government seems to believe it can prevent the growth of extremism by regulating external symbols - a dubious proposition. It remains to be clarified whether this new edict applies only to full hijab or also includes headscarves, which are more a sign of traditional conservatism than extremism. In any case, as unwise as this edict may be, it is little different from similar controversial regulations in France and Turkey. END COMMENT.

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